

# Soseki, the Past, and the Deeper Sea

By Paul Anderer

We commonly assume that great writers have something to teach us. This is especially true in countries, like Japan, where the legacy of Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism is strong. Reflecting on Japanese literature written since the Meiji Restoration (completed in 1868), no writer looms with greater stature than Natsume Soseki. Moreover, besides being a novelist, Soseki was a de facto teacher, first at a country school in Matsuyama (Ehime Prefecture), later at the Tokyo Imperial University, which later became the University of Tokyo. And so we might reasonably ask: what does Natsume Soseki have to teach us today?

It is widely suggested in the biographical and critical studies that Soseki is not only a writer of commanding influence across the whole of the 20th century, but that he was predisposed to be a writer/teacher. Many scholars, and notably the late Eto Jun, have made a case that Soseki, throughout his writing career, continued to embrace the Neo-Confucian values by which he was early educated. Accordingly, it is assumed that for Soseki, writing should possess a civic purpose, what we might call today a "social consciousness." In other words, because of his own Confucian education, Soseki is thought to be first of all a "responsible" writer, of a kind rarely seen after Meiji (1868-1912), and almost non-existent in the "playful," post-modern present.

Now typically, a Confucian writer cultivates an ethics, rooted in a sense of social responsibility, by attending closely to the lessons of the past. These lessons, or a teacher to impart them, become all the more crucial if

one views human nature to be bad at its origin, hence in desperate need of some model of goodness for a guide. Classical Confucianism was split on this issue. Mencius proposed that human nature was originally good, with Xun Zi later claiming the opposite (and I note here that the Confucian inscription on the front cover of the original

past can be personified as a caring teacher, even a nurturing parent, who transmits meaning and values across the generations; or whom one can turn to in a crisis.

And so is at least puzzling, when we consider Soseki's novels and their characters, especially how these novels portray the past or depict parents and teachers, that we find so little that seems "good" or positive. Indeed, one basic lesson we could take from Soseki's fiction is that the past is frightening, a repository of terrible secrets and treacherous deeds. Here, parents are either diminished figures or else totally absent, their place usurped by calculating, deceptive surrogates. Questions arise. How do we reconcile such novelistic "lessons" with the ethics of a Confucian-trained novelist? Does an author/teacher – Soseki – who finds the past so frightening, who represents parents as being either irresponsible or irrelevant, really have a conscience? What circumstances led Soseki to regard the past with such skepticism, or to darken his overall view of human nature?

There are, of course, early childhood experiences we might point to. He was the youngest of eight children, seemingly unwanted, who was sent out to live with foster parents (they too did not want him for long, and sent him back to his parents). This figure – an emotional orphan or adoptee – seems replicated again and again in the fiction, from the early *Botchan*, through *Sanshiro* and *Kokoro*, its own youthful hero caught between a natural father who is dying and a spiritual father who turns suicidal.

Throughout his youth and early edu-



Photo: The Museum of Modern Japanese Literature

Natsume Soseki (1867-1916) put to use all of his learning – Confucian, Buddhist and Western – to construct his most complex, tragic and liberating fictions

edition of *Kokoro*, is taken from Xun Zi).

We might say that a sense of social responsibility within the Confucian system is the product of prolonged study, lessons about the righteous conduct of ancestors or sages in the past. The cultivation of ethics, then, coincides with the formation of a historical consciousness. For a Confucian, the



Photo: The Museum of Modern Japanese Literature

cation, Soseki studied the Chinese classics. Even as an older man, approaching death, he continued to write poems in Chinese (*kanshi*). But once he matriculated to the University of Tokyo, he began to study English, like so many others of his generation, and to inform himself about European traditions in literature and philosophy (including the Victorian moral critics Carlyle and Arnold, who also had much to say about a writer's responsibility for the health and well-being of his culture and society). Soseki would attain a stunning mastery and understanding of written English, obvious not only from his critical essays on British and American authors, ranging from Swift to Meredith to Walt Whitman, but from his own occasional writings in this foreign language.

He was not alone. Uchimura Kanzo, Nitobe Inazo, Mori Ogai, Okakura Tenshin (Kakuzo), all acquired a remarkable facility in Western languages. Has any generation of Japanese since then, achieved a comparable level of active proficiency in such languages? The Meiji period was distinctive in many ways, but to me what deeply distinguishes Meiji period writers from most all of those to follow (even today, when *kokusaika*, like foreign travel, is an assumption; or when post-modern pastiche allows for all kinds of word play and linguistic "gaming" in fiction) is their active mastery of foreign, western languages.

Soseki was one such multi-lingual, "cross-cultural" author; as a writer of fiction, perhaps the greatest. As I noted, his study of English surely deflected him from his Chinese classical studies, where it did not present him with models and values that directly challenged those of his youth. In a sense, by virtue of this modern education, Soseki figuratively became an adoptee again, shuttling between cultures, neither of which could offer him a stable, welcoming home to weather the storms of change or of modernity.

Yet we notice that the college student Soseki, trying out his new-found ability to write elegant English prose, turned not to "modern literature" but to an



The Confucian inscription on the front cover of the first edition of *Kokoro* is taken from Xun Zi

Asian classic for a specimen to translate. Not, however, a Confucian classic. Instead, Soseki's first major composition in English was a translation of the Buddhist monk and poet Kamo no Chomei's *Hojo-ki*.

Like Soseki, Chomei thought that the past was frightening. He was especially wary of what befell Kyoto, the capital city of his own birth and upbringing. Born in the latter half of the 12th century, a period wracked by change roughly analogous to that of Soseki's late 19th century Japan, Chomei lived through an age marked by a collision of cultures (aristocratic vs. military), radical shifts in the composition of the urban population, along with a redefinition of power and its structures. Like Soseki, Chomei seems to be a relentless chronicler of human weakness and human suffering. His *Hojo-ki*, indeed, begins with a litany of sufferings that beset his world, from fire and earthquake to war, famine and misrule. It instructs us further that what we take to be stable, about the past or about human relationships, is not just illusory but is indeed life-threatening.

Where others might see the glories of the past, the *Hojo-ki* instead shows us burning houses. And, like the parable

of the burning house in The Lotus Sutra, it is concerned that we get out of this house, move off toward some safer place. Thus, Chomei's parable on human suffering contains a lesson, albeit of Buddhist derivation. Relinquish, or at least scale down, desire. Cling to nothing – not the past, not your home, not your parents, not your friends. Move away, if at all possible, from the embrace of large structures and complex societies. Cultivate, wherever you can, a consciousness of nature and a peace that derives from having few possessions; from living, we might say today, with lowered expectations.

Does the fact that Soseki labored to translate the *Hojo-ki* – at a critical juncture in his own intellectual development – reveal in symbolic or psychoanalytic terms something basic about his own personality and cultural values? If we want to know what Soseki, this great writer of the Meiji period, has to teach us, maybe we need better to account for such work as his translation into English of Chomei's medieval parable on human suffering, a manifestly un-Confucian parable, whose hero is less a socially-committed teacher than a haunted, if still surviving, recluse.



Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



The blue plaque for Natsume Soseki's residence in London

But we should turn now to Soseki's novels, the work to which he devoted most of his talent and his labor. Surely, if Soseki has lessons to teach us – about Japan and the modern world, or about our human nature – it is in his fiction that we should find them in their most elaborated and enduring forms. Perhaps the novels reveal traces of Confucian, or of Buddhist, consciousness. Or we may simply come face to face with the solitary author – Natsume Soseki – this adoptee or wayfarer, moving from home to home, without the certainty of a stable past or any hope for a settled future.

Are the lessons to be found in Soseki's writing, however great and established his national reputation, those of a homeless orphan after all?

Some of the early work, say *Botchan* or *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (*I Am A Cat*), circles (however warily) around worlds that are vaguely familiar, a domestic world or an academic world that mirrors or comically distorts manners and mores in Japan near the turn of the 20th century. But not all of the early writings reside within such recognizably “Japanese” frames and borders. Although Tokyo, nebulous and rather shadowy, figures as the locus of many such works, the city of London appears with powerful symbolic resonance in one of his earliest fictions.

Readers of *London Tower* may recall

it as a gothic allegory about a Japanese scholar who is living in London near the turn of the century, and of his excursion one day to visit a famous historical site. Setting out from his rooming house, we soon witness the abject terror of our traveler, who cannot make out the signs on the street, and who won't dare set foot in the underground for fear of where the trains will take him. Our stricken hero will yet find his way, mysteriously we might say, to the Tower.

But the curious thing about the whole tale is how little of the contemporary city actually comes into view, although we are in the company of a Japanese visitor who leaves his rooming house in present time and proceeds to walk the streets of “modern” London. This particular walker in the city, we quickly realize, is obsessed. He moves like a sleepwalker, almost a zombie, past ordinary urban sights and sounds. And he heads unerringly toward a site that seems predestined for his visit. In other words, the “hero” of Soseki's *London Tower* walks out of the present and into the past. But what kind of past awaits him?

The lessons of history, we soon see, are painted (some of them in blood) on the thick stone walls of the Tower. Or, in this visitor's hallucinatory imagination, they take life as scenes of a gruesome play, re-enactments or torture and execution. British history, indeed the history of its royal family and its aristocracy, is presented here as a chamber of horrors. And these visions are so powerful that long after our visitor has left the Tower, they trail after him, overwhelming his perception of ordinary life, silencing him from merely mundane conversation.

It would be convenient but too easy to dismiss *London Tower* as an early, experimental work, or to claim that its dark vision of the past represents

Soseki's fear and critique of the British Empire, or of what the pervasive study of English was costing him and his countrymen, in terms of sanity and a normal life. To be sure, in his lectures of 1911, and especially in “*Gendai Nihon no Kaika*” (Modern Development of Japan), Soseki himself seems to make this claim, about a culture losing its bearings because of an incessant preoccupation with the languages and cultures of the West. But we still must account for the later fiction, none of it set in England, all of it set in the country and indeed the city of Soseki's birth, all of it obviously written in Japanese, to see just how pervasive, how much a part not of British history but of Japanese culture and modern life, Soseki's dark vision was.

We could look to Sanshiro, the country youth lost in the big city. Or we could take up Daisuke, the adulterous lover and prodigal son, and of his vision, ignited by the love of a woman and the rejection of his family past, of a world going up in flames (while he is riding an ordinary tram in the city). But it is in *Kokoro*, built upon the relationship of a student and his adopted *sensei* (teacher), that we encounter the most powerful and illustrative novel about the “lessons” Soseki's fiction seems to contain.

The plot and the characters are so familiar to us now that we may take certain obvious but telling details of the novel for granted. First, the core relationship is between a student and an “adopted” teacher. Yet we have no idea what this student is studying, nor do we know what his “teacher,” who holds no formal academic position, indeed who seems to do no work at all, ever himself studied or took as his “specialization.” Second, the student is evidently bored by conventional education, but he is doubly bored by country life, any time he must return home and distance himself from the “new” life and wider world he is discovering in Tokyo.

Thus, a relationship is constructed: a student who has nothing formally to study, adopts a teacher who has nothing formally to teach. In this situation, no



one talks about the classics, about the Confucian or the Buddhist tradition, about the ancestors or the cultural past. All they have to talk about, or to communicate in a letter, concerns the loneliness and duplicities of the present, compounded by treacherous actions taken in the past. But we should note one further detail: sensei will die because he is still in the grip of his Meiji past, while the student, however troubled, is still alive as the novel ends.

As in *London Tower*, there are certain gruesome scenes – blood on the wall – and the overall atmosphere of *Kokoro* appears calculated to isolate its characters from the day to day sights and sounds of the city. All of Tokyo seems squeezed and contracted, into the cemetery at Zoshigaya, or into sensei's parlor. Street names, brand names, signposts of all kinds, are so few as to seem non-existent. The central characters have no names, just markers: sensei, the youth ("I" when he is telling the story, "you" when he is addressed in sensei's letter). And then there is the mystery man from sensei's past, K, whom we learn was a victim of sensei's youthful treachery and deceit, and who was driven to suicide because of it.

We might say then that in ignorance of the fact, the youth in *Kokoro* will adopt a sensei, indeed a surrogate father, who is a moral criminal. And, because of his fidelity to this sensei, he will betray his natural father, lying near death in the provinces. In Confucian terms, this is a horror story. It actually comes closer to illustrating a Buddhist belief in pervasive human suffering, but without Buddhism's corresponding message of a peaceful deliverance that comes from detached understanding.

Why is it then, that the youth in *Kokoro*, still thinks of this man as his sensei, imagines to the end that sensei has something of value to teach him? Let us recall the early scenes of the novel. The setting is the summer, a resort by a beach. The youth is vacationing there with a college friend, who is suddenly called back home because of an illness in the family. Alone now, our youth looks out over the mass of wading vacationers. Then he focuses

his gaze. He sees one Japanese, beside one Westerner, swimming out into the "deeper sea." Before any words are exchanged, the youth will gravitate toward this man as if he had found in that instant his sensei. Or, as if he has discovered some "deeper" meaning in this scene, but needs the Japanese man who is inside of it to teach him precisely what this meaning is.

And what the youth learns, it seems to me, are lessons Soseki's novels continue to teach. First, that growing up in the modern world may require you to leave home, distance yourself from parents and friends, and forge new if often strange alliances with persons you find in the "deeper sea." Second, that as we move in these new directions, embrace new role models or languages or behaviors, we are shadowed at every turn by our memories, our conscience, the sights and sounds and people of our past. Indeed, these memories and this past can seem as threatening as anything new or strange we face on the horizon of our uncertain future. Some of us, as well as some elements of our culture, may be lost in the effort to balance old and new. But not everyone, and not everything, is foredoomed to repeat the past, especially those elements of it that seem hurtful and life-denying.

When sensei's final letter arrives – his own last communication with anyone – the youth is in the provinces, at home as his father lies dying. Indeed, he is applying ice to his stricken father's forehead with one hand, while with his "free hand" he reaches for the delivered message. He will read just the beginning, enough to know he must return to Tokyo. He decides at this crucial moment to leave his own father's side – a father whom he obviously cares for and has been nursing – to go and meet an unknown fate. He boards a Tokyo-bound train, settles into his seat, and reads the letter – his sensei's last testament.

In it are contained certain secrets of the past, a record of shame – the betrayal of a friend and duplicity toward the woman he loves and will become his wife. The fact that

unscrupulous, betraying relatives victimized sensei in his childhood, is noted but never used to excuse his own actions. Sensei – and the heroism of this flawed character lies precisely here – knew what constituted right behavior at a crucial moment, and chose to act badly. This is perhaps the last lesson sensei passes on to the youth, and to ourselves as readers. The past we love may contain something shameful; the teacher to respect is one who opens our eyes to the knowledge which comes from both the good and the bad in life, and not from ideals, or from book learning, only.

These days, I am reading *Kokoro* as if it contained more hope than sadness. I see the figure of the youth, reading that fate-filled letter in the Tokyo-bound train-car. Here the novel ends, the letter read, the youth still breathing. Which is enough. And in my mind's eye I watch the youth get off that train, walk through a Tokyo of ordinary sights and sounds, until he arrives at the widow's home, to talk of how sensei lived and died, and of their own still possible futures.

So for me, Soseki remains a great writer, and a great teacher, because he had lessons to convey not about the past, but about survival in the present and the future. No doubt he put to use all of his learning – Confucian, Buddhist, Western – to construct his most complex, tragic and liberating fictions. Almost a century ago, Soseki wrote novels about a modern world that was necessarily wider, more complex and more frightening, than Japan and its past. He wrote about that "deeper sea" within which all of us, a century later, regardless of our national origin, enter and inhabit as a matter of collective survival. JJI

*Paul Anderer is a professor of Asian Humanities at the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Columbia University. He is the author of Other Worlds: Arishima Takeo and the Bounds of Modern Japanese Fiction and Literature of the Lost Home: Kobayashi Hideo – Literary Criticism, 1924-1939.*